

Malawi's Peaceful Revolution 1992-94: the role of the Church of Scotland

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The Church of Scotland and the Making of the Malawi Nation

It has long been recognised that, of all the overseas missionary initiatives of the Scottish Church during the nineteenth century, the work begun at Livingstonia and Blantyre in the mid-1870s was to have an especially profound historical impact. In terms of political history, it was the presence of the Blantyre Mission in southern Malawi which led to the area coming under British "protection" in 1889-1991 when otherwise it would almost certainly have been included in the Portuguese territory now known as Mozambique.¹ The origins of the modern Malawi nation therefore lie in the determination of the Scottish missionaries, and their supporters at home, that the area stretching from the Shire Highlands northwards along the Lake, was the appointed territory for the implementation of Livingstone's distinctive vision of "Christianity and commerce". If a nation is an "imagined community", it can be argued that Malawi began as the product of Scottish missionary imagination!² Then later, at another political crisis in the 1950s, when Malawi was in danger of being swallowed up by the racist Federation of Rhodesia and Nyasaland, the intervention of the Church of Scotland was again decisively important. T.C. Smout has argued that this was "the last occasion on which [the Church of Scotland] swayed government policy on any matter".³ Meanwhile the Congress movement which would form the first government of independent Malawi in 1964 had emerged out of the "native

¹ See A.C. Ross, *Blantyre Mission and the Making of Modern Malawi* (Blantyre, CLAIM, 1996), 85-110.

² See K.R. Ross, "Christian Faith and National Identity: the Malawi Experience", *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa*, no. 93 (December 1995), 51-62 [52-53].

³ T.C. Smout, *A Century of the Scottish People 1830-1950* (London, 1986), 207.

associations" formed by "graduates" of Scottish mission schools,⁴ and was strengthened in its struggle against the Federation by the solidarity and practical support of Scottish missionaries. Underlying this directly political engagement was the deeper cultural affinity which was noted by George Shepperson:

The predominant European culture in Nyasaland until very recent times has been Scottish: in fact the histories of Scotland and Nyasaland pursue remarkably parallel courses. Both are poor; but both have distinctive educational traditions which have reinforced the conviction of their many migrants that they are worth better jobs than their homeland can offer them. From such conditions, there has sprung up in both countries a very definite radicalism, at home and abroad.⁵

The idea of Malawi as "a Scotland in Africa" has been spun out in a romantic and sometimes maudlin manner but where it did take concrete effect was in the life of the church. As colonial rule was dismantled it emerged that there was another institution in Malawi for which Scottish missionaries were responsible. In the villages, the hills and the townships of Malawi were Presbyterian congregations which would grow and flourish in the post-independence period. This was a Christianity deeply rooted in the vernacular⁶ yet retaining the distinctively Scottish ethos which you cannot miss when you notice, at the beginning of a service in a remote rural congregation, the replication by the presiding elder of the threefold bow which the Moderator gives to the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland!

⁴ See J. McCracken, *Politics and Christianity in Malawi 1875-1940* (Cambridge, 1977), 257-273.

⁵ G.A. Shepperson, "External Factors in the Development of African Nationalism, with Particular Reference to British Central Africa", *Phylon*, vol. xxii no. 3 (Fall 1961), 207-225 [212].

⁶ See "Vernacular Translation in Christian Mission: The Case of David Clement Scott and the Blantyre Mission 1888-1898", in K.R. Ross, *Gospel Ferment in Malawi: Theological Essays* (Gweru, 1995), 107-125.

Such a convention speaks of the deeper religious affinity which gives to the Church of Scotland an enduring importance, even in a situation characterized by growing ecclesiastical pluralism and diversity.⁷ Awareness of this *koinonia* gave the Church of Scotland an unmistakable commitment to continue its partnership with the Church of Central Africa Presbyterian into the post-independence period. Now, however, it would enter a new phase. Already, well before political independence, the Blantyre and Livingstonia Missions had "handed over" full responsibility for the church to local leadership. Now they would relate as "church to church" rather than "church to mission". It was also expected that direct Church of Scotland engagement with socio-political issues would not continue. That would be the business of the local church. This position was maintained for thirty years, even in face of the development of a highly oppressive political system which brought deep injustice and much suffering to the people of Malawi. As World Mission General Secretary, Chris Wigglesworth explained:

The feeling was that people on the spot had to get on with things. For a long time, while providing economic assistance and skilled personnel that was clearly needed (and still is), the Church of Scotland leaned over backwards to respect the self-government rights of our sister church in Malawi wanting to make up its own mind on various things. This approach was partly the result of a corrective mechanism to counter the colonial mentality which assumed that direction should come from the outside. So, if the Malawi church leadership felt that the best thing was not to say too much then we had to be guided by that rather than appearing to interfere. But as everybody

⁷ See K. Fiedler, "Even in the Church the Exercise of Power is Accountable to God" in *God, People and Power in Malawi: Democratization in Theological Perspective*, ed. K.R. Ross (Blantyre, 1996), 200-219; and J.C. Chakanza, "The Independence Alternative: A Historical Survey", *Religion in Malawi*, no. 4 (1994), 32-42.

knows, the situation towards the end of 1991 was clearly deteriorating.⁸

In fact, the situation in 1991, in terms of human rights abuse, was much better than at earlier periods when the Church of Scotland had felt justified in remaining silent. In reality, it was not the internal situation in Malawi which had changed so much as the international context. The collapse of Communism in eastern Europe, the end of the Cold War and the new-found concern of Western nations about good governance and human rights in Africa had given rise to what Larry Diamond has called "a global democratic 'zeitgeist' of unprecedented scope and intensity".⁹ It was within this new international situation that there opened up new possibilities for church engagement with the Malawian political order. This contribution, through an examination of recent history, questions whether it was realistic for the Church of Scotland to expect to be able to withdraw from direct political responsibility in Malawi. The main focus will be on the part played by the Church of Scotland in the rapid political change of 1992-94 but to put this in context it is necessary to review certain aspects of earlier post-independence history.

Legitimation of a Dictator: Kamuzu Banda as Kirk Elder

As the post-independence period unfolded it became clear that the Church of Scotland would not have any choice as to whether it should play a part in the political ideology of independent Malawi. Kamuzu Banda, the Life President (Dictator) who ruled Malawi from 1964 to 1992, had been ordained an elder of the Church of Scotland while he

⁸ Chris Wigglesworth in *Human Rights and the Making of Constitutions: Malawi, Kenya, Uganda*, edd. J. Lewis, Owens & L. Pirouet (African Studies Centre, University of Cambridge, 1995), 101-02.

⁹ L. Diamond, "The Globalization of Democracy: Trends, Types, Causes and Prospects" in *Global Transformation and the Third World*, ed. R. Slater *et al.* (Boulder, 1992), 37; cf. S.P. Huntington, *The Third Wave: Democratization in the Late Twentieth Century* (Norman, 1992).

was a medical student in Edinburgh in 1941.¹⁰ When he came to power in Malawi, Banda was shrewd enough to recognise that he ruled over a religious, predominantly Christian and notably Presbyterian population. Religious, Christian and, if possible, Presbyterian legitimisation of his authority would form an important part of the ideological apparatus which would be required to keep him in power. Hence it became a familiar part of his rhetoric that he was an “elder of the Church of Scotland”. Given the high esteem in which the Church of Scotland was generally held, this status acted to bolster his authority. Curiously, he never became a member of the Church of Central Africa Presbyterian and appeared at worship only on national occasions. In the business of religious-political power play, it seems that he preferred to appeal “over the head” of the local church to his status as kirk elder. This was consonant with the quasi-European persona which he developed, for example, by always wearing an immaculate three-piece suit, raincoat and Homburg hat and by refusing to speak any language other than English. It meant that, whether it liked it or not, the Church of Scotland was a potent factor in the legitimisation of the dictatorship. As Lupenga Mphande explains:

Upon [Banda’s] arrival in Malawi, he publicly declared that while in Scotland he had become an Elder of the Church of Scotland. With that announcement his mission and that of the Livingstonian missionaries in the country were enjoined: during the more than thirty years of his atrocious reign of terror never once did the Scottish-oriented Church in Malawi raise a voice of protest.¹¹

¹⁰ “It was in 1941 in Guthrie Memorial Church in Easter Road my father and the Kirk Session of that congregation ordained Hastings Banda as an Elder.” The Rev. Dr Fergus Macpherson, *Verbatim Record of the Proceedings of the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland, 1992*, 648.

¹¹ L. Mphande, “Dr Hastings Kamuzu Banda and the Malawi Writers Group: The (un)Making of a Cultural Tradition”, *Research in African Literatures*, vol. 27 no. 1 (Spring 1996), 80-101 [86].

The importance of the Church of Scotland connection was particularly apparent when the Banda regime began to come under pressure following the end of the Cold War in 1989. As it struggled to sustain its legitimacy there was a renewed emphasis on Banda's status as kirk elder. Indeed he travelled to Edinburgh in 1991 in order to receive a scroll honouring him for being an elder of the Church of Scotland for fifty years. This was presented to him by the Moderator, the Rt Rev. W.B.R. Macmillan, on 29 October 1991 at a special luncheon at Edinburgh Castle hosted by the Rev. Charles Robertson of Canongate Kirk. This was not an event organised by the Board of World Mission and Unity and was regarded by its officials as a private occasion arranged by a few friends of Dr Banda.¹² It did not feature in the British press. Very different was the interpretation advanced by the Malawi Government. When Parliament opened in December members were instructed that they must congratulate the President on his achievements as an elder and make reference to the Edinburgh Castle ceremony. Many speakers in the House dwelt on the fact that the President had been recognised not only as a great statesman but also as a great churchman!¹³ When the government-controlled *Daily Times* reviewed the year 1991, its front page carried a colour photograph of Banda receiving the scroll from the Moderator, with Robertson and "Official Hostess" Mama Kadzamira looking on.¹⁴ This is described as a "TRIUMPHANT MOMENT". As the dictatorship approached a time of testing, the Church of Scotland was playing a prominent role in providing it with the religious legitimisation without which no government in Malawi would be secure.

To people in Malawi it was perplexing that the Church of Scotland should appear to be unhesitatingly supporting the dictatorship under which thousands upon thousands of Malawians were harassed, beaten, maimed, raped, imprisoned, exiled and murdered. The number of those subjected to torture during the Banda era was recently estimated at

¹² Rev. Jim Wilkie, interview, Edinburgh, 31 October 1996.

¹³ *Hansard*, December 1991, *passim*.

¹⁴ *Daily Times*, 30 December 1991.

between 250,000 and 500,000.¹⁵ The tip of this iceberg of suffering was made known internationally by such human rights organisations as Amnesty International and Africa Watch.¹⁶ Still the Church of Scotland was silent and allowed itself to be manipulated by the propaganda of the dictatorship so as to function as an ideological prop to the Banda regime. The bafflement of the Malawi people was not restricted to those who suffered physical torture. As broadcaster Joyce Ng'oma vividly put it: "I think we all felt detained, though we didn't go into detention".¹⁷ In this context the Church of Scotland's identification with the repressive "Big Brother" was difficult for people to understand. The rationale for remaining silent was that the Church of Scotland had "handed over" to the "local church" and it would not be legitimate to "interfere" in the church-state relations in independent Malawi. Indeed, in the post-independence period there was a sense of allowing time for Malawians to address social and political problems on their own initiative. As Stanley Hood, writing as Convener of the Sub-Saharan Africa Committee in 1992, explained: "For many years the Church of Scotland remained silent on the denial of human rights in Malawi. We were much criticised for our silence. But we recognised that Malawi was a young country, and hoped that, in due time, the situation would improve."¹⁸ Furthermore, those holding office in Edinburgh were deeply conscious that any move they made that was unfavourably received by the Banda regime could have very serious repercussions for the church and its leaders on the ground in Malawi.¹⁹ As they

¹⁵ Mr Y.A. Lambat, UDF MP for Blantyre Rural-East, speaking in the Malawi Parliament during the debate on the National Compensation Tribunal. *Hansard*, Tuesday 19 March 1996, 500.

¹⁶ See, e.g., *Malawi: Human Rights Violations 25 Years After Independence* (London, Amnesty International, 1989); *Where Silence Rules: The Suppression of Dissent in Malawi* (Washington and London, Africa Watch, 1990); and *Malawi: Prison Conditions, Cruel Punishment and Detention Without Trial* (London, Amnesty International, 1992).

¹⁷ Mrs Joyce Ng'oma, interview by Dr Isabel Apawo Phiri, Blantyre, 9 January 1995.

¹⁸ Rev. Stanley Hood to Hon. Dr Hetherwick Ntaba, 18 June 1992.

¹⁹ Rev. David Lyon, interview, Edinburgh, 31 October 1996.

explained, when breaking their silence in 1992: "We in Scotland have been reluctant so far to comment publicly on these matters out of a concern not to place members of our sister church in Malawi in danger".²⁰ It was also considered advisable to keep Church of Scotland personnel on the ground in Malawi while hoping for a better day. For these reasons they felt justified, even if uncomfortable, to keep quiet and allow the Church of Scotland to be part of the ideological support structure of the Banda regime. David Lyon, General Secretary of the Overseas Council (later Board of World Mission and Unity) from 1974 to 1987 has recalled the "anger, disappointment and frustration" with which he regarded the Banda dictatorship and has stated that, "my conscience is not clear."²¹ The Kirk's position is viewed today with equal regret by many Malawians. As the present Blantyre Synod General Secretary, Misanjo Kansilanga, commented: "The silence of the Church of Scotland gave the impression that everything was okay in Malawi. We *could* not speak. How we wished *you* would speak for us!"²²

Finally, the time did come for the Church of Scotland to speak. On 8 March 1992 there occurred the turning point in recent Malawian history: the issue of the Roman Catholic bishops' Pastoral Letter *Living our Faith*.²³ This was the first public criticism of the Banda regime to be made within Malawi and it proved to be the catalyst of profound political change in the two years which followed. At the time, Banda reacted angrily to the Letter and, perhaps in an attempt to divide the churches at this critical point, appealed to his Scottish Presbyterian credentials. As the *Daily Times* reported: "Referring to the Irish Catholic bishop in Mzuzu, who is reported to have drafted the pastoral

²⁰ Statement by Department of World Mission and Unity, Church of Scotland Press Office News Release, 16 March 1992.

²¹ Rev. David Lyon, interview, Edinburgh, 31 October 1996.

²² Rev. Misanjo Kansilanga, interview, Blantyre, 1 July 1996.

²³ *Living our Faith*, Pastoral Letter of the Catholic Bishops of Malawi to be Read in Every Catholic Church on 8 March 1992; later published under the title *The Truth Will Set You Free*, Church in the World, 28 (London, CIIR, 1992); also repr. in *Christianity in Malawi: A Sourcebook*, ed. K.R. Ross (Gweru, 1996), 203-15.

letter, the Ngwazi said as an Elder of the Church of Scotland he was not surprised since the Catholics in Dublin, Ireland, did not like the Presbyterians in Scotland.”²⁴ In what was by now clearly a *kairos* for Malawi,²⁵ the decision was taken within the Church of Scotland’s Board of World Mission and Unity to express solidarity with the Catholic bishops and to distance itself from the Banda regime. For Africa Secretary Jim Wilkie and General Secretary Chris Wigglesworth, the Edinburgh Castle affair had been “the last straw” and they had awaited an opportunity to set the record straight.²⁶ Within a few months, that opportunity had come. On the evening of 13 March 1992 the BBC World Service broadcast into Malawi an interview with Chris Wigglesworth in which he made it clear that he could not regard Banda as a serving elder of the Church of Scotland.²⁷ The effect was dramatic! As it dawned on the Malawian public that there was something bogus about Banda’s claims, the dictator began to suffer a loss of legitimacy from which he never recovered. As one of John Lwanda’s youthful informants indicated: “It was then that we knew that the ‘force’ was not really with this guy”.²⁸ Banda’s loss of face continued when the Church of Scotland General Assembly of 1992 agreed to “place on record that it is erroneous to describe Dr Hastings K. Banda as an ‘elder of the Church of Scotland’”.²⁹ This statement, issued in a context where the “mainline” churches in Malawi were

²⁴ *Daily Times*, 13 March 1992.

²⁵ See *Malawi: A Moment of Truth* (London, CIIR, 1993).

²⁶ Rev. Jim Wilkie, interview, Edinburgh, 31 October 1996.

²⁷ After consultation with the Principal Clerk of the General Assembly the technical position was made clear in the following terms: “We ... wish to make it a matter of public record that Dr Banda is not an elder of the Church of Scotland in any meaningful sense. While technically, ordination to the eldership is for life, a person with that status is not properly regarded as an elder unless they are a member of a kirk session (local Church committee). Dr Banda has not been such a member for nearly fifty years”. Statement by Department of World Mission and Unity, Church of Scotland Press Office News Release, 16 March 1992.

²⁸ J.L.C. Lwanda, *Promises, Power, Politics and Poverty: Democratic Transition in Malawi (1961-1999)* (Glasgow, 1996), 108.

²⁹ Minutes of the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland, 1992, 61.

distancing themselves from the government, helped to provoke a crisis of legitimacy which the Banda regime proved unable to surmount. The subsequent two years witnessed a desperate struggle by the Malawi Congress Party propagandists to identify alternative sources of religious legitimation.³⁰ These were taken ever less seriously and the fact that Banda could now no longer claim to be a kirk elder was interpreted as a massive loss of face for the once invincible *Ngwazi*.

Awaiting the Kairos: the Nurture of an Alternative Vision

At an official level the Church of Scotland was, until the *kairos* of 1992, mostly silent concerning the human rights abuses and oppressive policies of the Banda government. Yet, within the wider web of the links which unite Scottish and Malawian Christians there were forces at work to prepare for the day when the Banda regime would be challenged and a new dawn would break for Malawi. From the beginning of the one-party era there were Church of Scotland missionaries, such as Hamish and Anne Hepburn and Andrew and Joyce Ross, who identified with Malawian opposition to Banda. Their stand encouraged those who opposed Banda on grounds of Christian conviction even when this meant going into exile and/or risking their lives. Amongst those who would play a leading role in marshalling the opposition to Banda which finally led to his defeat in the Presidential Election of May 1994, were people with long family connections with the Church of Scotland missions. The leader of the United Front for Multi-Party Democracy, a movement of exiles based in Lusaka, was Harry Bwanausi who was born in 1925 at Blantyre Mission where his family had lived since his grandfather was employed to carry goods from the River Shire at Chikwawa during the earliest days of the Mission.³¹ The church elder who was most prominent in organising the Public Affairs Committee, the church-based body which proved to be

³⁰ See K.R. Ross, "Not Catalyst but Ferment: The Distinctive Contribution of the Churches to Political Reform in Malawi 1992-93" in *The Christian Churches and Africa's Democratisation*, ed. P. Gifford (Leiden, 1995), 98-107 [103-104].

³¹ Dr H.W. Bwanausi, interview, Zomba, 8 December 1994.

the engine of political change in the 1992-93 period,³² was Jake Muwamba, the grandson of the first theological student to be trained by the Livingstonia Mission.³³ Edda Chitalo, the first woman to occupy a prominent position in the multi-party movement, was born and raised on the Blantyre Mission.³⁴ These were people of strong character and deep Christian faith who were able to weather the storm of the Banda era and contribute to political renewal when the time came. Families with a long association with the Church of Scotland missions proved to be among those who nurtured an alternative vision and sustained it even through the darkest days of repression.³⁵

Notable amongst such families were Orton and Vera Chirwa, exiled after the “cabinet crisis” of 1964, leaders of the opposition in Tanzania and Zambia, abducted from a border area of the latter country and sentenced to death by a “traditional court” in 1982. It was this incident which provoked the only public intervention by the Church of Scotland in Malawi’s internal affairs during the Banda era. At the 1983 General Assembly it was agreed to “respectfully request the Life President of Malawi, himself ordained as an elder in the Church of Scotland, to exercise the Presidential Prerogative of Mercy”.³⁶ The Very Rev. Dr Andrew Doig was sent as a special envoy to plead for clemency for the Chirwas. Though Dr Banda responded angrily and refused to see his old friend Dr Doig, the death sentence was commuted to life imprisonment. They remained in prison under very harsh conditions until Orton died in 1992 shortly before all political prisoners were

³² See K.R. Ross, “The Renewal of the State by the Church: the Case of the Public Affairs Committee in Malawi”, *Religion in Malawi*, no. 5 (1995), 29-37.

³³ Mr T.J. Muwamba, interview, Blantyre, 4 January 1995. McCracken, *Politics and Christianity in Malawi*, 144, 149.

³⁴ Mrs Edda Chitalo, interview by Dr Isabel Apawo Phiri, Blantyre, 15 May 1995.

³⁵ Terence Ranger has recently drawn attention to the role of Christian families in African politics with his case study of the Methodist Christian faith and nationalist political involvement of the Samkange family in Zimbabwe. Malawi offers interesting Presbyterian parallels. See T. Ranger, *Are We Not Also Men? The Samkange Family and African Politics in Zimbabwe 1920-64* (London, 1995).

³⁶ Minutes of the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland, 1983, 71.

released. Vera survived to emerge as an inspirational figure in the social and political reconstruction undertaken from 1993. Banda's very clearly expressed resentment at the Church of Scotland's initiative made it clear that he would maintain his kirk elder status on his own terms and would not take kindly to any pastoral admonition from the church. The President's anger at Dr Doig served as a warning to local church leaders who became even more careful to avoid any possible confrontation.³⁷ Nevertheless the Church of Scotland's intervention was not forgotten and gave a signal that the Banda regime could not count on unquestioning Presbyterian legitimisation.

One young CCAP minister who picked up this message very clearly was the Rev. Peter Kaleso. His case provides an example of another way in which the Church of Scotland played a role in nurturing an alternative vision for Malawi. It was during a year of study at New College in Edinburgh, under Church of Scotland sponsorship, that Kaleso began to be deeply troubled about the political situation prevailing in his country.³⁸ On his return he began preaching sermons which fairly directly challenged the excesses of the one-party system. Following the "Mwanza accident" in which four senior politicians were brutally murdered on government orders,³⁹ Kaleso's was the lone voice in the church which publicly condemned the action. After he fled on foot into Mozambique and finally found refuge in Swaziland, it was the Church of Scotland which came to his rescue and provided the means for him to take another period of study in Edinburgh. After his return to Malawi he remained an uncompromising critic of the Banda regime and emerged as a fiery orator in the campaign for political reform in 1992-93. Kaleso himself makes it very clear that the Church of Scotland's role in his formation was very important in enabling him to understand

³⁷ Very Rev. Dr Silas Ncozana, interview, Blantyre, 28 June 1995.

³⁸ Rev. Peter Kaleso, interview, Blantyre, 10 April 1995.

³⁹ See [Mtegha] Commission of Inquiry, Mwanza Road Accident Report (Malawi Government), 4 January 1995.

the application of the biblical gospel to the social and political situation prevailing in Malawi.⁴⁰

The long history of Church of Scotland involvement in Malawi created another, rather unusual, form of political influence during the one-party era. When Banda returned to Malawi to lead the independence movement in 1958 he had been out of the country for more than forty years. Hence he had no close friends among Malawians and preferred to maintain an air of austere detachment.⁴¹ Combined with other quirks of his personality and the politics of dictatorship, this ensured that he became an isolated figure to whom no one spoke on equal terms. Possibly the lone exception to this was a Church of Scotland minister, the Rev. Dr Fergus Macpherson. Banda had been ordained to the eldership in 1941 by Macpherson's father and had been a frequent visitor to the Manse. Later, Banda had taught Chinyanja to the young Macpherson who was preparing to go to Central Africa as a missionary. The two therefore enjoyed a longstanding intimacy and Macpherson could always be sure of access to the Life President.⁴² On occasion, he made use of this privilege to plead for clemency for particular victims of repression who were known to him and to probe for opportunities to discuss with Banda the nature of his presidency. Banda's responses were suggestive of a deeply disturbed personality as he switched between affectionate familiarity one moment and hysterical paroxysms of rage the next. This was particularly evident when Banda invited Macpherson to Gleneagles Hotel during the Commonwealth Heads of Government meeting in 1977. Macpherson's request for the release of a political detainee named Mrs Serenje provoked fits of apparently uncontrollable rage before Banda finally acceded to the

⁴⁰ Rev. Peter Kaleso, interview, Blantyre, 10 April 1995. See further K.R. Ross, "Where were the Prophets and Martyrs in Banda's Malawi? Four Presbyterian Ministers", *Missionalia*, vol. 24 no. 2 (1996) 113-28 [120-2].

⁴¹ Prior to his return to Malawi Banda wrote to Fergus Macpherson, then Principal of Livingstonia, requesting his confidential opinion of the Congress leadership since "I know none of them". Macpherson wisely declined. Rev. Dr Fergus Macpherson, interview, Edinburgh, 20 November 1996.

⁴² Rev. Dr Fergus Macpherson, interview, Edinburgh, 18 August 1994.

request.⁴³ There is no evidence that anything was achieved by Macpherson's visits beyond the release of individual detainees. Yet it is of some significance to notice that if there was any hope of Banda being alerted to the excesses and injustices of his regime, it probably lay with a minister of the Church of Scotland.

“We Want Change”: Solidarity with Rebels and Confusionists

We have already alluded to the impact felt in Malawi when the Church of Scotland signalled its support for the Catholic bishops' epochal Pastoral Letter of 8 March 1992, first through the BBC broadcast of World Mission General Secretary Chris Wigglesworth on 13 March and later by the General Assembly in May. It is necessary to appreciate that all public media in Malawi at this time were dominated by the government propaganda which provided massive ideological support for the dictatorship. Hence at a time of political crisis all ears (of the educated) were tuned to the BBC "Focus on Africa" programme. Wigglesworth's disowning of Banda as an elder therefore had an electric effect in the country. Next morning people talked of nothing else! The broadcast of the General Assembly debate on 19 May had, if anything, a still more powerful effect. When the present writer returned to Malawi in September of that year, people were still talking about that momentous evening. It is doubtful if any General Assembly debate of modern times has had such a nationally stirring effect even in Scotland itself! The Assembly called "upon the Government of Malawi to provide 'tangible and irreversible evidence of a basic transformation' in its observance of the fundamental human rights of all Malawi's citizens" and "regretfully endorse[d] the action of Malawi's major donors in withholding development aid for a limited period".⁴⁴ The importance of this deliverance was indicated immediately in a faxed message⁴⁵ from the leader of the United Front for Multi-Party

⁴³ Rev. Dr Fergus Macpherson, interview, Edinburgh, 20 November 1996.

⁴⁴ Minutes of the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland, 1992, 61.

⁴⁵ For the importance of the "fax revolution" to political change in Malawi in 1992-93 see R.M. Nkhala Bayausi Chirwa, "Information Technologies in Malawi's

Democracy, Dr Harry Bwanausi, to Church of Scotland Africa Secretary Jim Wilkie:

Please convey the exiles' grateful thanks to Fergus Macpherson, Dr Ross and to your dearsel and to the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland for the support on the Malawi issue. The Moral Authority of the KIRK [sic] will emancipate us for the second time, the first being when its resolution dismantled the Federation of Rhodesia and Nyasaland in 1960.⁴⁶

Not without some hyperbole, Bwanausi thus indicated the importance of the General Assembly's deliverances for those working for progressive political change in Malawi. Meanwhile the Church of Scotland was becoming involved in the movement for political change in other ways besides making use of the airwaves.

One important way in which the relationship between the Church of Scotland and the Presbyterian Synods in Malawi has developed in recent times is that they have come to relate not only on a one-to-one basis but also through their common membership of the World Alliance of Reformed Churches. As the World Mission and Unity Department waited for an initiative to come from the CCAP within Malawi, it became clear that one opportunity for decisive action to be taken lay with WARC. Meeting in Lusaka early in May, leaders of the WARC Southern Africa region issued a strong letter supporting the Catholic bishops and calling the CCAP "to be prophetic".⁴⁷ Operating within the WARC framework, the Church of Scotland could use its knowledge of the Malawi situation to influence policy, yet without adopting the domineering patron-client relationship which, since the 1950s, it had been seeking to outgrow. The value of this new framework became clear early in June when a WARC delegation visited Malawi. Chris

Political Transition" in *Church, Law and Political Transition in Malawi 1992-94*, ed. M.S. Nzunda and K.R. Ross (Gweru, 1995), 111-120.

⁴⁶ Faxed letter from Dr H.W. Bwanausi to Rev. James Wilkie, 20 May 1992.

⁴⁷ "Statement on the Current Situation in Malawi", issued by The Southern Africa Alliance of Reformed Churches, meeting in Lusaka, 29 April to 5 May 1992.

Wigglesworth was on the team which also included church elders from Lesotho and the Netherlands and a minister from the USA.⁴⁸ In a situation where, according to Misanjo Kansilanga, the CCAP "knew what it wanted to say, but not how to do it",⁴⁹ and where all the machinery of the police state was being mobilized to keep them quiet, the presence of the WARC delegation provided the opportunity for decisive action.

The letter addressed to President Banda was signed by representatives of Blantyre and Livingstonia Synods and of the General Synod, as well as by the four members of the WARC delegation. It endorsed the Catholic bishops' Pastoral Letter and went further to call for the appointment of a broadly based Commission with the mandate "to make specific proposals for structural reform towards a political system with sufficient checks and balances on the use of power, and guarantees of accountability at all levels of government; to review the judicial system, in line with the rule of law; to look into the distribution of income and wealth required by the demands of social justice".⁵⁰ Banda replied positively to this letter and invited church leaders to meet with his ministers to discuss matters of common concern.⁵¹ Though the government then stalled and was clearly reluctant to accede to the formation of a forum where fundamental political issues would be addressed, the churches' leaders had gained the initiative and, after a long struggle, succeeded in establishing the "Public Affairs Committee" which met regularly with the "Presidential Committee on Dialogue" during the late 1992 and early 1993 period which marked the turning of the tide in favour of the emergent pro-democracy movement.⁵² The visit of the WARC delegation therefore proved to be vitally important to the

⁴⁸ See "The Nation of Malawi in Crisis: the Churches' Concern", World Alliance of Reformed Churches, Geneva, 2 June 1992.

⁴⁹ Rev. M.E. Kansilanga, interview, Lilongwe, 16 November 1994.

⁵⁰ "The Nation of Malawi in Crisis", 2.

⁵¹ His Excellency Ngwazi Dr H. Kamuzu Banda, President of the Republic of Malawi, to Mr Benjamin Masilo, Vice-President, World Alliance of Reformed Churches, 10 June 1992.

⁵² See Ross, "The Renewal of the State by the Church", 31-33.

achievement of peaceful political change in Malawi. While the Catholic bishops were responsible for the prophetic inspiration which sparked off the whole process, the WARC-CCAP initiative in taking on the tough task of engaging directly with the government and constructing the machinery for the achievement of radical political reconstruction was no less important. Working within the WARC framework the Church of Scotland was able to exercise influence in Malawi at a time of profound political crisis, while still fully respecting the integrity of the local church.

Another ecclesiastical organisation within which the Church of Scotland could work to influence the Malawi situation was the Council of Churches for Britain and Ireland. Early in 1993 the Church of Scotland had been instrumental in the formation of a Malawi Sub-Group of the CCBI Africa Forum. The key players in this group were Fr Bill Turnbull of the White Fathers, the Rev. Christopher Race, representing Bishop Mark Santer of the Anglican diocese of Birmingham, the Rev. Donald Arden, formerly Anglican Archbishop of Central Africa, and later the Rev. Pat Davies, representing the English Catholic Bishops' Conference.⁵³ Shortly after the visit of the WARC delegation, the CCBI decided to send a further high-level team in the persons of the Rt Rev. Mark Santer, Anglican bishop of Birmingham, the Rt Rev. James O'Brien, Roman Catholic bishop in Hertfordshire, and the Very Rev. Robert Davidson, Moderator of the Church of Scotland General Assembly of 1990.⁵⁴ The administration of the CCBI visit was conducted at the Church of Scotland offices where Africa Secretary Jim Wilkie acted as its "Ecumenical Coordinator". This set a pattern for CCBI action which was followed during the following two years of rapid political change in Malawi (as will be illustrated below in respect of the 1993 Referendum and the 1994 General Election). To the WARC and CCBI initiatives, the Church of Scotland sought to add the influence of the Conference of European Churches which met in Prague in September 1992. A Kirk delegation was successful in

⁵³ Letter from Rev. J.L. Wilkie, 15 November 1996.

⁵⁴ See Statement by Representatives of the Council of Churches for Britain and Ireland, 26 July 1992.

persuading the CEC Assembly “to press the Government of Malawi for the release of Christian detainees and an immediate top-level conference on constitutional reform”.⁵⁵ Through these ecumenical networks the Church of Scotland found a new way, at a strategic time, to influence events in Malawi.

A more traditional method was to make representations to the British Government. Baroness Chalker of Wallasey, the Minister in the Foreign Office with direct responsibility for Britain’s relations with Malawi, recognised that “the Church of Scotland’s influence in Malawi and with Banda personally has been a powerful force for progress”.⁵⁶ The officials of the Board of World Mission and Unity could also provide information to MPs concerned to raise questions about Malawi in the House of Commons, notably Sir David Steel. The importance of the Church of Scotland’s role was recognised early in January 1993 when Robin Christopher of the Foreign Office visited the church offices to meet with the Moderator and officials of the Board of World Mission and Unity and the Committee on Church and Nation. The democratisation process in Malawi was at a particularly delicate stage and the British Government wished to ensure that Dr Banda would not take too reactionary a line. The request of the Foreign Office (at the urging of Kenneth Kaunda of Zambia) was that the Church of Scotland might send a special envoy to see Banda in person.⁵⁷ This led to the Moderator writing directly to Banda requesting that Fergus Macpherson might have a “personal meeting” with the President.⁵⁸ At a time when almost no one outside the ruling clique could speak directly with Banda, Macpherson was eventually granted a private audience

⁵⁵ Church of Scotland Press Office News Release, 9 September 1992.

⁵⁶ Baroness Chalker of Wallasey to Sir David Steel, quoted by Jill Clements (secretary to Sir David) to Dr Chris Wigglesworth, 25 March 1993.

⁵⁷ J.L. Wilkie, “A Peaceful Transition to Democracy in Malawi: Some Reflections about how to achieve it”, Confidential World Mission and Unity Briefing Document, 20 February 1993.

⁵⁸ Rt Rev. Hugh R. Wyllie, Moderator of the General Assembly to His Excellency the Life President of the Republic of Malawi Ngwazi Dr H. Kamuzu Banda, 21 January 1993.

and spoke with the President of the urgent need for democratisation in Malawi.⁵⁹ The direct effect of this conversation is impossible to calculate but Banda did take a more conciliatory line towards the opposition in the run-up to the Referendum and in his acceptance of the results. What the incident does clearly indicate is that the Church of Scotland had a voice which was respected in the formation of British Government policy and, on occasion, could even play a part in British diplomacy.

Another critical contribution of the Church of Scotland to the movement for political change was to offer solidarity and support to those Malawi church leaders who exposed themselves to the wrath of the totalitarian system by speaking and acting in favour of political change. The most prominent and outspoken minister in the weeks following the Pastoral Letter was the minister of St Andrew's Mzuzu, within the Livingstonia Synod, the Rev. Aaron Longwe. So strong was his biblically based condemnation of the one-party system that it was no surprise when he was repeatedly detained and his life was perceived to be in danger. In this situation Longwe testifies: "It was the backing of the church worldwide that saved me".⁶⁰ At the centre of this worldwide support was the Church of Scotland, whose Africa Secretary Jim Wilkie visited Longwe and wrote a confidential report on his experiences of harassment and detention.⁶¹ The fact that Longwe was married to a former Church of Scotland missionary heightened public interest in Scotland. The experiences of the couple were featured in the Scottish press and an interview with Longwe at the height of his persecution was broadcast on Radio Scotland.⁶² In this way the Church of Scotland provided for Longwe the lifeline of international publicity.

⁵⁹ Fergus Macpherson, "Personal Record of a Special Visit to Malawi, 31 January to 7 February 1993".

⁶⁰ Rev. Aaron Longwe, interview by Dr Klaus Fiedler, 3 December 1994.

⁶¹ J.L. Wilkie, "The First Detention (in Mzuzu, Malawi) of the Rev. Aaron Longwe and Mr Chenda Mkandawire 27-30 April 1992", Confidential Report, Church of Scotland Board of World Mission and Unity, 7 May 1992.

⁶² Interview with Rev. Aaron Longwe, Mzuzu, Malawi, Radio Scotland, 12 May 1992.

“If it were not for the Church of Scotland”, he later declared, “some of us would have been dead by now.”⁶³

Later in the year when Silas Ncozana, General Secretary of the Synod of Blantyre, became the key figure in the organisation of PAC, he was extremely grateful to be able to count on Church of Scotland support in a situation where he had his fax line cut, received a series of death-threatening telephone calls, heard frequent reports that he had been targetted by MCP hit squads, had to travel incognito every time he went on the road for fear of assassination, and was generally left in no doubt that he was out of favour with the government and that his life was therefore at risk.⁶⁴ As Malawi church leaders such as Ncozana and Senior Clerk to the General Synod, Misanjo Kansilanga, manoeuvred to secure peaceful and progressive political change, they were significantly strengthened by the kind of support expressed in an Open Letter from the Moderator of the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland: “Until there is real progress on freedom of speech, freedom of association, freedom of worship, and respect for the rule of law, Malawi will remain on a rapid downhill course which can only increase the suffering of her people. We pray that God will give wisdom to the Government, Church and people of Malawi as you discharge your urgent and historic responsibilities”.⁶⁵ Such solidarity served to steel the nerve of those who were branded “rebels and confusionists” by the official media as they sought radical political change in Malawi.

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⁶³ *Scotsman*, 23 February 1993.

⁶⁴ Very Rev. Dr Silas Ncozana, interview, 28 June 1995. Ncozana had given to the Church of Scotland a code which would be used to signal his arrest: “PAUL AND SILAS REPEAT”. Very Rev. Dr Silas Ncozana to Rev. Jim Wilkie, 8 May 1992.

⁶⁵ Open Letter to the General Secretary, the Christian Council of Malawi, and to the Senior Clerk of the General Synod, and the General Secretaries of the Synods of Blantyre, Livingstonia and Nkhoma, the Church of Central Africa Presbyterian, from the Rt Rev. Hugh R. Wyllie, Moderator of the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland, 1 September 1992.

As it became clear early in 1993 that the one-party system was crumbling and that there was need for radical political reconstruction, church leaders and others were struggling to find the way forward.⁶⁶ The event which gave them the necessary orientation was the Swanwick Conference of February 1993 which was hosted by the Council of Churches for Britain and Ireland but with the Church of Scotland playing the central role in the organisation. The significance of this meeting has been highlighted by the Rev. Emmanuel Chimkwita, who was then Acting Chairman of the Public Affairs Committee:

The meeting of the Public Affairs Committee with the Council of Churches in Britain and Ireland (CCBI) in February 1993 was a very important meeting in the history of Malawi. The Pastoral Letter was really a catalyst but the pivotal event in the process of change was the Swanick [sic] meeting where the strategy was formed which guided the PAC in the National Referendum and the General Election.⁶⁷

The MCP government seems to have recognised the importance of this meeting at the time since it sent two (uninvited) ministers to present its case and suffered considerable loss of face when the ministerial delegation was turned away from the conference which condemned the resistance of the Malawi Government to democratic change.⁶⁸ The conference also put in place the mechanisms by which support would be channelled to the emergent democratic movement in Malawi.

⁶⁶ For studies of the 1992-93 period see *Kirche und Gesellschaft in Malawi: Die Krise von 1992 in historischer Perspektive* (Hamburg, EMW Informationen no. 98, 1993); *Malawi: A Moment of Truth* (London, CIIR, 1993); T. Cullen, *Malawi: A Turning Point* (Edinburgh, 1994); Lwanda, *Promises, Power, Politics and Poverty: Democratic Transition in Malawi (1961-1999)*; J. Newell, "A Moment of Truth? The Church and Political Change in Malawi, 1992", *The Journal of Modern African Studies*, vol. 33, no. 2 (1995), 243-262; *Church, Law and Political Transition in Malawi 1992-94*, edd. Nzunda and Ross; J.K. van Donge, "Kamuzu's Legacy: the Democratisation of Malawi. Or Searching for the Rules of the Game in African Politics", *African Affairs*, vol. 94 (1995), 227-257.

⁶⁷ Rev. Emmanuel Chimkwita, interview by Dr Klaus Fiedler, 4 December 1994.

⁶⁸ See *Daily Times*, 4 March 1993.

Immediately after the conference Jim Wilkie, as Chair of the CCBI Africa Forum, appealed for support for the Public Affairs Committee Referendum Monitoring Programme (PACREM) and the Education for Participatory Democracy Programme.⁶⁹ Peter With of DanChurchAid had attended the Swanwick Conference and was able to secure the granting of substantial sums to enable the churches in Malawi to prepare people for the Referendum. Funds from the Westminster Foundation for Democracy were channelled through the Church of Scotland office. Without this support it is doubtful whether there would have been sufficient civil society activity to sustain the democratisation process. The one-party government sought to capitalize on its immense advantages in organisation, transport, finance and the media to snuff out the pro-democracy movement.⁷⁰ The support for the Public Affairs Committee orchestrated by the Church of Scotland facilitated a certain levelling of the playing field.

Further solidarity was offered a few weeks before the Referendum by the visit of another CCBI delegation which encouraged work for democratic freedom and protested against harassment, intimidation and violence on the part of the Government.⁷¹ The 1993 General Assembly agreed to "deplore the continuing efforts of the present Government of Malawi to frustrate a free and fair expression of the wishes of the people of Malawi through harassment, intimidation and violence."⁷² When the Referendum finally took place on 14 June 1993 its conduct was witnessed by a team of "ecumenical observers" from the CCBI coordinated by Peggy Owens, a volunteer from the PC(USA) working

⁶⁹ Circular letter from Rev. Jim Wilkie, Chair, CCBI Africa Forum, 22 February 1993.

⁷⁰ See *The Referendum in Malawi: Free Expression Denied*, Article 19 Issue 22 (April 1993).

⁷¹ Statement by Representatives of the Council of Churches for Britain and Ireland Visiting Malawi 27 April to 2 May 1993, signed by Rev. Patrick Davies, Assistant General Secretary, Catholic Bishops' Conference of England and Wales, Rev. Stanley Hood, Convener, Church of Scotland Africa Committee, Rt Rev. Humphrey Taylor, Anglican bishop of Selby.

⁷² Minutes of the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland, 1993, 62.

with the Church of Scotland Board of World Mission in Edinburgh.⁷³ What remained following the 63% vote in favour of multi-party democracy was the campaign leading up to the General Election of 17 May 1994. The Church of Scotland remained in close touch with the Public Affairs Committee in Malawi and was again responsible for coordinating an ecumenical delegation of observers to monitor the conduct of the General Election.⁷⁴ By involving itself, usually on an ecumenical basis, at strategic points in the democratisation process, the Church of Scotland was able to play a constructive role in the making of the Second Republic in Malawi.

Conclusion

In the mission history of the Church of Scotland, Malawi is a unique case since the Scottish missions were integral to the emergence of the nation. Recent events have shown that, while the relationship of the Church of Scotland to its "daughter" churches in Malawi was transformed by the "hand-over" to local leadership in the late 1950s, still the Church of Scotland retained a powerful influence in Malawian national life – for good or ill. It was an influence on which Kamuzu Banda capitalized in order to secure powerful religious legitimisation for his despotic rule. In the end, however, this tactic rebounded on him when the "moment of truth" came for Malawi and his claims to eldership were dramatically disowned by the Church of Scotland. This leaves the outstanding question: should this not have been done much earlier? Were the churches wrongfooted by the Banda dictatorship when the President was able to appeal "over the head" of the CCAP to the Church of Scotland for religious legitimisation and neither of the "partners in mission" was able to make any sustained protest? The silencing of church social witness in post-independence Malawi raises questions about the missiology of partnership as it took effect at that

⁷³ Statement of the United Kingdom Ecumenical Observers, 16 June 1993.

⁷⁴ See Joint Supplementary Report on Malawi by the Board of World Mission and the Church and Nation Committee to the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland, May 1994. *Reports*, 693.

time, particularly when, as Malawian novelist Paul Zeleza has pointedly observed: "To be silent is to promote tyranny".⁷⁵

Meanwhile however, the Kirk, through a variety of channels, had been working to nurture an alternative vision. These efforts bore fruit when the *kairos* came and among the key players were some who had been nurtured in important ways by the influence of the Church of Scotland. When Malawian church leaders were very exposed and vulnerable as they took the lead in confronting the totalitarian regime during 1992, the solidarity of the Church of Scotland was a powerful factor in strengthening their resolve. Moreover, the fact that the Church of Scotland could orchestrate international support for the struggle of the Malawi churches, through, for example, the World Alliance of Reformed Churches and the Council of Churches in Britain and Ireland, acted powerfully to turn the tide in favour of the pro-democracy movement initiated by the churches' witness. This much more ecumenical approach reflects the fact that, compared with earlier years, the Presbyterian axis is only one connection in a complex network of international political, economic and ecclesiastical relations. It is a sign of the times that it was the Roman Catholic bishops whose witness first drew attention to the need for radical political reform. Nevertheless, as has been shown, Malawi's success in peacefully dismantling the one-party system and introducing democratic government owed not a little to the Church of Scotland engagement with the process of political reform. The long historical connection did prove to be a valuable resource at a time of social and national crisis. This study suggests that church links which transcend national boundaries *can*, in the post-colonial post-Cold-War world, be of strategic political significance. However, it must be noted that a missiology of "hands-off" partnership proved inadequate to address the evils of the Banda dictatorship. The "hands-on" engagement of 1992-94 helped to facilitate a peaceful transition from dictatorship to democracy. What will this experience mean for the Church of

⁷⁵ Prof. P.T. Zeleza, Guest Lecture, Chancellor College, University of Malawi, 22 July 1996.

Scotland's understanding of its missionary engagement around the world?⁷⁶

⁷⁶ The author is grateful to the Rev. Dr Chris Wigglesworth, General Secretary, for permission to consult and cite documents held by the Church of Scotland Department of World Mission, 121 George Street, Edinburgh.

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